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Letter dated 19 September 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Côte d'Ivoire to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith a copy of the statement of His Excellency Mr. Laurent Gbagbo, President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the outbreak of the armed rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have this statement issued as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) D. Philippe **Djangone-Bi**
Ambassador
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Annex to the letter dated 19 September 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Côte d'Ivoire to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Letter of President Laurent Gbagbo to Ivorians on the occasion of the first anniversary of the outbreak of the armed rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire

My dear compatriots,

Our country has been in the grips of war for a year, a year of nightmare. Who would have thought that this situation would occur in Côte d'Ivoire? Since it is impossible to reach each and every one of you on this day marking the first anniversary of that sad night of 18 to 19 September 2002, I have decided to address you through this letter.

Naturally, my first few thoughts are for the innocent victims of this ridiculous war, for those who died and for those who will forever carry physical and mental scars. But this anniversary also affords me the opportunity to share with you, my compatriots, and with all our friends who helped us and are still helping us, my assessment of this wasted year.

I have already noted that those who attacked Côte d'Ivoire cannot say that they acted or are acting in the best interests of the inhabitants of this country. The daily suffering of our fellow countrymen and women through the length and breadth of the country indicates otherwise.

That is why I opted to focus my political struggle on a peaceful transition to democracy. Every one is well aware of the reasons why Ivorians decided of their own free will to endorse the programme I submitted to them during the 2000 presidential elections.

I fought for 30 years for a peaceful transition to democracy because I believe it is the only way that Côte d'Ivoire can survive as a nation and deal with the new challenges facing our country, Africa and the world. This belief is based on the following three main reasons:

- Democracy will enable Côte d'Ivoire to break free from the political paralysis caused by 30 years of one-party rule without resorting to violence, as I wrote as far back as 1983 in *Côte d'Ivoire pour une alternative démocratique* (A democratic alternative for Côte d'Ivoire);
- Democracy can help Côte d'Ivoire to deal with the economic crisis that began in the 1980s and that, at its peak in the 1990s, resulted in the breaking off of our relations with the major international financial institutions;
- Lastly, democracy makes it possible to implement a policy that entitles all the inhabitants of this country to equal protection against diseases, gives every child the same opportunities in life and guarantees balanced development in all the regions.

We have now seen it all, going from a one-party system of government, to a coup d'état, a military regime and a rebellion. Each experience shows us just how

vital democracy is. Democracy is the basis of stability and the development of the major countries and it is democracy that will save Côte d'Ivoire.

Accordingly, I propose at this juncture that we review the road we have travelled together before expressing my views on the current process for resolving the crisis.

Let us look back at the situation in our country in 2000 when I came into office.

First, the political scene. President Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993 brought into sharper focus the tussle for power which had been brewing among his would-be successors. It was against that pernicious backdrop that President Bédié took office. That power struggle among the would-be successors led to the December 1999 coup d'état in Côte d'Ivoire.

In order to prevent our country from straying away from the path of democracy for good, I called upon my party and all Ivorians to get involved in the management of the military transition. Together, we adopted a new Constitution based on respect for human rights and an Electoral Code that guarantees transparent elections.

Nevertheless, the country was still in dire economic straits. It posted negative growth of -2.3 per cent in 2000, something that had never happened in our entire economic history.

The performances of the public revenue-generating bodies were poor, with shortfalls in revenues of CFAF 139.5 billion in 2000 compared to CFAF 119 billion in 1999. The external debt still accounted for nearly 90 per cent of the gross domestic product, a proportion which mortgaged our resources and jeopardized our relations with the international financial institutions. Domestic arrears stood at 433 billion francs.

As a result of the country's inability to meet its external commitments, the international financial institutions and our development partners broke off their relations with Côte d'Ivoire. All sectors of the economy were in crisis.

On the social front, the fate of young people in a failed educational system has led to repeated crises. As a result of deepening poverty in the countryside and in the towns, deteriorating health facilities and the inability to get health care, Ivorians were beginning to feel that they were not deriving any benefits from development.

The security situation gave great cause for concern. The civil war in Liberia spawned a proliferation of military firearms in the subregion and led to increased crime in Abidjan and the big cities.

It was against this backdrop of insecurity in Côte d'Ivoire that clashes erupted as a result of the military junta's refusal to publish the results of the presidential election and calls to challenge such results, once they were published.

Therefore, when I came to power, the Government itself was in need of reform. The first goal I set myself was to forge a coalition of all political forces in the country to appeal to all Ivorians and all those living in Côte d'Ivoire to mend their ways and forgive each other by organizing the Reconciliation Forum. It was in that spirit that I formed the successive Governments and undertook the reforms required to put the economy back on track and to implement the political programme for which you elected me.

The reforms undertaken include all the steps required to restore relations with donors: a proper budget; the appointment of heads of public revenue-generating agencies on the basis of applications; compliance with the external debt payment schedule; the negotiation and conclusion of a programme with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; opening up to new development partners.

Our Parliament enacted laws establishing the democratic institutions provided for by the Constitution, such as the Independent Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Council. At the same time, Parliament enacted laws establishing the new statute for the police and the statute for prefects.

The aim of drafting a law on military planning was to give the country an army capable of efficiently carrying out its traditional defence and security functions. That law had not been finalized when the war erupted.

The decentralization process was under way. The interest generated by the election of general councils is indicative of the faith that the rural population in particular has in decentralization. This election also showed that all the country's political parties had agreed to abide by the rules of democracy.

The reform of the coffee-cocoa sector empowered farmers, thus ensuring that those who actually produced the crops reaped the fruits of development.

The aim of providing free school stationery and abolishing the wearing of school uniforms is to ensure that children are not denied access to education because of their parents' social and economic situation.

Universal health insurance is a system of health coverage that concerns all the inhabitants of Côte d'Ivoire, irrespective of their nationality, in order to ensure that everyone receives equal treatment with regard to health care.

Those are the reasons why you elected me. It behoved me to meet your expectations. During the two years that we carried out these reforms together, I enjoyed your trust. It did not even cross our minds that resentment of those reforms would precipitate a war in this country.

That is why I say that the attack which occurred in the night of 18 to 19 September 2002 is a war against the democratization and modernization of Côte d'Ivoire.

The Ivorian crisis is therefore not what it was made out to be. It is not a mutiny, because the "zinzins" and "Bahéfouès"[1] were but front men. It is not a war between different factions of the Government.

It is a failed, violent coup d'état which has been transformed into a rebellion. Those involved in the coup, backed by foreign mercenaries, attacked our country to take power by force. Having failed, they are now occupying part of the country with the support of the worst war criminals that West Africa has ever known.

They committed unspeakable atrocities against the civilian population and are still plundering the agricultural and mining resources in the areas under their occupation. The country's economic and social life is in shambles. Côte d'Ivoire is crawling along.

[1] Two fresh batches of army recruits.

You and I have been battling ever since the night of 18 to 19 September 2002 against this dangerous, outdated way of seizing power by force.

The armed and defence forces of Côte d'Ivoire were on the front lines from the outset. They responded appropriately to liberate the town of Abidjan. They paid a heavy price in the early fighting. Allow me to pause at this juncture to pay tribute to our soldiers who died fighting.

In the northern towns and rural areas, the forces of law and order (police officers, gendarmes), customs and forestry officers were systematically murdered, often together with their families. The survivors (civilian authorities, civil servants, economic operators, ordinary citizens) had to abandon everything and flee in the most terrible circumstances. They lost everything.

It is all this suffering visited upon our people and our country that is described as the Ivorian crisis. At one point, attempts were made, especially in Europe, to blame the Ivorian crisis on insecurity. According to that theory, the main factor would no longer be the war but, for example, "death squads". The fact still remains that a democratically elected Government was attacked by armed rebels in an attempt to overthrow it.

I had two options to try and end the suffering and restore dignity to Côte d'Ivoire: war or negotiations. In order not to prolong the suffering of our people and to preserve the chances of national unity, I opted to negotiate.

The negotiations started from the outset of the crisis under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Here I wish to thank all the Heads of State of the subregion and President Thabo Mbeki, then Chairman of the African Union, for their tireless efforts to restore peace in Côte d'Ivoire.

I would also like to express, on your behalf, our deep gratitude to France which, in addition to deploying a large peacekeeping force on the ground, proposed to the political leaders and rebels the holding of the Linas-Marcoussis round-table meeting.

For my part, while I believe that the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement was not the best of solutions, I have resolved to fully implement its provisions, which might help Côte d'Ivoire emerge from the crisis. As I have repeatedly stated, being in favour of or against Marcoussis is not what matters. What does matter is being in favour of or against peace, being for or against the long-term interests of Côte d'Ivoire. I am in favour of peace, which is why I have made my share of sacrifices. In my view, the most difficult issues are now behind us.

There are four such issues:

1. The appointment of Seydou Diarra and the formation of the Government. The overwhelming majority of public opinion was against this Government. The problem was not the fact of including persons other than those from my party in the Government. What Ivorians did not want to see happen was the inclusion of rebels in the Government of the Republic, the very same people who took up arms — they are still armed — and attacked the country. By dint of negotiations with various individuals, I managed to win you over. You agreed for the sake of peace. The Government, which has been in existence since February 2003, is now complete.

2. The Amnesty Act. On this point, too, many of you justifiably had reservations about granting amnesty to rebels who have yet to put down their arms and who occupy part of the country. There again, I had to go against my own instincts by requesting our Parliament to vote for the Amnesty Act, which I immediately promulgated.

3. The reintegration of deserters into the army. I requested the Minister responsible for defence to issue a ministerial order reintegrating all deserters into the army, whether they were involved or not in the 1999 coup d'état, all the attempted coups d'état and the civil war.

4. The reintegration of deserters into units of the army. I asked the Chief of Defence Staff to receive and assign to units of the army military deserters who return to the fold. Some of these took up arms against their brothers in arms, who have agreed to take them back.

As the Head of State, I found it difficult to get you to accept the foregoing and thank you for your understanding. There are other points of the Marcoussis Agreement relating to article 35 of the Constitution, the Law on Rural Land Tenure, the Law on Identification and the Citizenship Code.

These issues are important, but their settlement should not be seen as a precondition for territorial integrity and peace.

We have made major sacrifices, but have received precious little in return. The only positive result we have received, is that the war between two armed groups using guns and cannons has stopped. It is a giant step forward towards winning peace. That step brings to an end large-scale deaths among our fellow-countrymen and people living in Côte d'Ivoire and allows some of our compatriots to return to their homes.

However, that result is of little import weighed against the nation's and State's problems. For eight months, we have been marking time, floundering, going around in circles.

Almost all the problems that persuaded Ivorians to accept the Marcoussis Agreement have still not been resolved:

- The country is still divided into two;
- National radio and television are not broadcast in the rebel-controlled areas;
- Government authority has not been restored throughout the country;
- The rule of law is not in effect throughout the country, since some areas are under the arbitrary rule of arms;
- Social services such as schools and health care have been disrupted.

All the sacrifices we have made should have paid greater dividends. The rebellion failed yesterday and it definitely cannot triumph today. So we should let reason triumph. Accordingly, on your behalf, I call upon the international community, especially ECOWAS, France and the United Nations, all of whom are represented on the Monitoring Committee, to make those who took up arms against Côte d'Ivoire see reason. The moral pact that we have with the international community forbids us from using war to put an end to war.

I intend to abide by that pact. However, I will not stand by and see Côte d'Ivoire's future jeopardized, a future which is inextricably linked to that of West Africa as a whole.

My dear compatriots,

On your behalf, I urge the rebels to understand that they should not further jeopardize their reintegration into the Ivorian community by exasperating their countrymen and the international community.

In 2005 we should organize fair, free and transparent elections on the date mandated by the Constitution. But what sense does that announcement have if even today we are unable to reunite the country? What is that announcement worth if there are armed people throughout the bush, villages and towns of Côte d'Ivoire? What purpose does that announcement serve if we have not even begun to identify citizens and to issue identity documents? What use is that announcement today if we have not started the enumeration and begun to establish electoral lists? What is the use of this declaration of intent if we are not able to appoint prefects in the departments, prefects who remain the symbol of the enduring nature of the State and ensure that voting is done in accordance with the law?

No, I do not want my country to be mired in an artificial peace. The cessation of open hostilities is not the end of the war. I will declare the war over when our country is united once again.

On this anniversary of the outbreak of the war, I wish to ask you, my dear compatriots, to take heart and to never give up hope on Côte d'Ivoire.

Throughout this whole year, our resistance has been bolstered by the strong links between the people and the army united behind their Head of State. That is our strength. That is the path to peace.

I call on the rebels to lay down their weapons. This country has already suffered too much. The time has come to put an end to our people's suffering. It is time to rebuild our country. May God bless Côte d'Ivoire.

Laurent Gbagbo